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REVITALIZATION OF THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. In its resolution 1990/69 of 27 July 1990, the Economic and Social Council decided to review the implementation of the measures agreed upon for the revitalization of the Council, pursuant to its responsibilities for promoting international economic and social cooperation and in accordance with the relevant articles of the Charter of the United Nations, at its second regular session of 1992. At the same time, it will be recalled that the General Assembly, in its resolution 45/264 on the restructuring and revitalization of the United Nations in the economic, social and related fields, had requested the Secretary-General to submit an annual progress report to the General Assembly, starting from its forty-seventh session, on the implementation of the result of the restructuring and revitalization process in the economic, social and related fields, in which he was requested further to provide information on any recommendation agreed upon which had not been implemented as scheduled. In addition, the Assembly decided in the same resolution to review the implementation of the provisions of paragraph 5 of its resolution 45/264 at its forty-eighth session in the light of the experience of the reforms agreed upon, with a view to enhancing the impact and effectiveness of the restructuring and revitalization of the United Nations in the economic, social and related fields. Those provisions relate to the continued implementation of the relevant resolutions of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council on the restructuring and revitalization process and to the arrangements set out for the organizational session and the high-level, coordination, operational activities and committee segments of the substantive session of the Council.

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2. In the light of the reviews which the General Assembly intends to conduct, it seems clear that this report should concentrate essentially on an examination of the implementation of Council resolutions 1988/77, 1989/114 and 1990/69 and decision 1990/205. To the extent, however, that provisions of the above-mentioned resolutions have become moot consequent upon the adoption of General Assembly resolution 45/264, the attention of the Council will be drawn to such instances. In addition, a commentary will be provided on those provisions of Council resolution 1988/64 which warrant review as a result of the roles prescribed for the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC) and the Joint Meetings of the Committee for Programme and Coordination and the Administrative Committee on Coordination (CPC/ACC) in Assembly resolution 45/264.

II. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COUNCIL RESOLUTIONS AND DECISIONS ON REVITALIZATION

A. Annual general discussion

3. In its resolution 1988/77, the Council had sought to reorganize the manner in which its annual general discussion was conducted in order to make it more dynamic and to allow enough time for a dialogue and an examination of views between members and executive heads of the organizations of the United Nations system. This provision has been superseded by the decision in General Assembly resolution 45/264 to discontinue the annual general discussion. In the light of this clear statement of policy, the Secretary-General intends to assist the Council in making arrangements of an organizational character that would lead to the full implementation of the intent of General Assembly resolution 45/264 with regard to the high-level segment of the Council.

B. Major policy themes

4. In its resolution 1988/77, the Council decided to undertake annual in-depth discussions of previously identified major policy themes selected on the basis of a multi-year work programme. In decision 1990/205, it decided to establish, on a provisional basis, the following multi-year work programme for its in-depth consideration of major policy themes during the period 1992-1994:

1992

The international trade system and its impact on the development of the developing countries

Eradication of poverty in the developing countries, including the impact of structural adjustment programmes on vulnerable groups

1993

Environment and development

Population, development and socio-economic indicators

1994

Technology and industrialization in the development process of the developing countries

International cooperation against illicit production, supply, demand, trafficking and distribution of narcotic drugs

5. In accordance with the provisions of Council resolutions 1988/77 and 1989/114 and decision 1990/205, the provisional multi-year work programme is to be reviewed annually and adjusted on a roll-over basis as necessary. At its organizational session of 1992, the Council decided that the theme for the high-level segment should be "Enhancing international cooperation for development; the role of the United Nations system", and that the coordination segment should deal with coordination of policies and activities of the organizations and other bodies of the United Nations system relating to the following themes: "Assistance in the eradication of poverty and support to vulnerable groups, including assistance during the implementation of the structural adjustment programmes", and "Prevention and control of HIV/AIDS and programmes addressed to the mitigation of its negative socio-economic consequences".

6. The provisions of General Assembly resolution 45/264 do not indicate as to whether the multi-year work programme of major policy themes should continue. In particular, the resolution is silent on the question of whether the major policy themes for the high-level segment should derive from the multi-year work programme. In practice, the Council has decided not to follow the provisional programme it agreed upon in its decision 1990/205 concerning the work programme for in-depth consideration of major policy themes during the year 1992. For his part, the Secretary-General is of the view that it would be unduly restrictive to decide on the major policy theme or themes for the high-level segment as part of a multi-year work programme. The themes to be discussed at the high-level segment appear to fall into the category referred to in paragraph 2 (a) (iii) of Council resolution 1988/77 which anticipates that the Council, as and when necessary, would address urgent and emerging issues relating to acute international economic and social problems. There is also evidently a wish on the part of the Council to have the high-level segment deal with themes of topical importance. The Secretary-General believes, nevertheless, that it would be useful to maintain a multi-year work programme in respect of themes for the coordination segment. General Assembly resolution 45/264 anticipates that discussions on the themes should focus attention on the activities of the United Nations system in selected economic and social areas, taking into account the report of the Secretary-General as chairman of ACC which should contain a system-wide

assessment of the status of coordination with regard to the themes and include recommendations as appropriate. The Secretary-General has been constrained in preparing the system-wide assessments on the selected coordination themes for 1992 owing to the relatively short time between the organizational session of the Council at the beginning of February 1992, at which time the Council selected the themes, and the commencement of the substantive session of the Council at the end of June 1992. The limited time placed at his disposal has made it difficult to engage in system-wide collection and analysis of data and consultations with the specialized agencies or in the identification of recommendations, which the Council would expect such reports to contain. As it is, the reports have not been made available six weeks or sufficiently before the opening of the Council, which is a matter for regret. The Secretary-General would therefore wish to suggest to the Council that it retain a multi-year work programme of themes on a roll-over basis with respect to the discussions to take place in the coordination segment of the Council.

C. Monitoring

7. In accordance with Council resolution 1988/77, the Council is expected to monitor the implementation of the overall strategies, policies and priorities established by the Assembly and the Council. In this regard, the Council requested the Secretary-General to circulate each year to Member States and all organizations of the United Nations system as well as to the Council at its organizational session, a consolidated note on the decisions adopted by the General Assembly in the economic, social and related fields, highlighting matters that require action by them; and it further decided that it would obtain information from the specialized agencies on the steps taken to give effect to the recommendations of the General Assembly on the economic, social and related matters that fall within their respective mandates and areas of competence; and further, that the Council should examine in-depth the relevant chapters of the proposed medium-term plan and sections of the proposed programme budget of the United Nations in the light of the recommendations of the Committee for Programme and Coordination.

8. The provisions relating to monitoring in Council resolution 1988/77 have largely been unimplemented. In 1989 the Secretary-General circulated a consolidated note as referred to above. In subsequent years, however, the Secretary-General suspended the circulation of the note which was serving little practical purpose, and the Council has not asked him to reinstitute its circulation. The Council has also not found the time to examine in depth the relevant chapters of the proposed medium-term plan and sections of the proposed programme budget of the United Nations. The Council has also taken no action to obtain information from the specialized agencies on the steps taken to give effect to the recommendations of the General Assembly and the Council on matters falling within their respective mandates and areas of competence.

9. In previous reports to the Council, the Secretary-General has stressed the importance of the monitoring function and the need for the Council to

adopt a more systematic approach to exercising it. He has put forth a number of suggestions in this regard which he now wishes to repeat. 1/ The Council might therefore wish to consider the following:

(a) Conducting a periodic review of the progress made in the implementation of the International Development Strategy, which provides a framework incorporating policies and priorities agreed upon by Governments and covering various sectors of the United Nations system activities;

(b) Considering specific modalities for follow-up and monitoring when adopting resolutions;

(c) Requesting ACC to assist in reviewing and monitoring the implementation of overall policy guidelines and priorities, particularly in respect of their translation into mutually complementary or jointly planned activities.

10. It was also proposed that in preparing the draft programme of work for consideration by the Council, the Secretary-General could draw attention to policies and priorities that the Council should monitor and put forward suggestions on how these should be monitored.

D. Operational activities for development

11. In its resolution 1988/77, the Council elaborated its role in regard to operational activities for development. The Council decided that it should recommend to the General Assembly overall priorities and policy guidelines for operational activities for development. In the context of its coordination function, it should try to ensure greater coherence and effectiveness in the activities of the United Nations system; address a limited number of policy coordination issues each year, including those identified in General Assembly resolution 42/196; carry out, once every three years, a comprehensive policy review; and monitor the follow-up to its recommendations. It also decided that the subject of operational activities for development of the United Nations system and system-wide coordination of those activities should be considered by its Third (Programme and Coordination) Committee.

12. In practice, the linkage between the exercise by the Council of its coordination functions and its responsibilities for operational activities within the context of the measures enacted in Council resolution 1988/77 has not proved easy to effect. The Secretary-General had previously suggested that Member States might wish to review ways and means of clarifying and strengthening capacities for exercising governance and providing overall guidance by establishing, within the framework of the Council, an operational activities committee entrusted with the responsibility of undertaking in-depth reviews of policies and principles on the basis of information provided by individual governing bodies. In this regard, the Council will have before it at the session an analytical report on strengthening the operational activities of the United Nations system including the governance and financing

aspects thereof (decision 46/465). Meanwhile, the General Assembly, in its resolution 45/264 established an operational activities segment of the Council devoted to operational activities of the United Nations system focusing, in particular, on the follow-up of policy recommendations and decisions of the General Assembly and coordination of operational activities on a system-wide basis, taking account of Council resolution 1988/77. The triennial review would be undertaken first by the Council and thereafter by the General Assembly.

13. The decision to provide a specific institutional focus for considering operational activities through the establishment of an operational activities segment of the Council is an indication that the Council is still seeking ways and means to best fulfil its responsibilities in this area. More thought may yet need to be given by the Council as to how to strengthen its institutional capacity to deal with the issue of operational activities for development of the United Nations system.

E. Coordination

14. The coordination function is one of the most important responsibilities devolving on the Council under the Charter. The revitalization resolutions have recognized the need for the Council to fully exercise these responsibilities as an indispensable aspect of the revitalization process. Towards this end, Council resolution 1988/77 had determined, inter alia, that the specialized agencies should be invited to resume submission of analytical summaries of their annual reports for consideration by the Council; that the executive heads of the specialized agencies or their senior representatives should participate actively in the deliberations of the Council; and that coordination instruments such as the Joint Meetings of the CPC/ACC and reports of the ACC and its subsidiary bodies should be rationalized in order to enable the Council to carry out its coordination functions in an effective manner. At the same time, in its resolution 44/194, the General Assembly requested, inter alia, the ACC to modify substantially the format and content of the annual overview report in the light of the relevant conclusions and recommendations of the CPC at its twenty-ninth session. 2/ On the subject of the Joint Meetings of the CPC/ACC, the Council further decided in its resolution 1988/64 to hold the Joint Meetings in New York in conjunction with the autumn session of the ACC in order to facilitate the participation of the members of CPC at a high level as well as the participation of the executive heads of the specialized agencies.

15. Since the adoption of Council resolution 1988/77, the specialized agencies have been making available annual reports to the Council to which attention has been regularly drawn by the Secretary-General. Those reports have rarely been the subject of discussion in the Council. Executive heads of the specialized agencies have been participating in the Council's annual general discussions as well as in informal exchanges of views with members of the Council. The latter exercise has proved a valuable means of communication and dialogue between Council members and executive heads.

16. With regard to the format and content of the ACC reports, the recommendations of the CPC were taken into account and have been followed in the preparation of subsequent reports. In addition, as indicated in the foreword of the Secretary-General to the annual report of ACC for 1991, 3/ the ACC has decided to undertake a comprehensive review of its role and functioning. Information on the progress made in carrying out this review will be covered in the annual report for 1992.

17. The provisions of General Assembly resolution 45/264 built on the revitalization resolutions by taking additional measures to allow the Council to more effectively carry out its responsibilities for the coordination of the activities of the specialized agencies, organs, organizations and bodies of the United Nations system in the economic, social and related fields, in accordance with Articles 63 and 64 of the Charter of the United Nations. The substantive session of the Council of 1992 will be the first opportunity for these new measures to take effect. It is already evident, however, that an adjustment will be required to the current arrangements for the Joint Meetings since these arrangements are not compatible with the provisions of General Assembly resolution 45/264. That resolution calls for the themes for the coordination segment to be decided at the organizational session of the Council, taking into account the recommendations of the Joint Meetings of CPC and ACC; and for the coordination segment to benefit from the recommendations of the Joint Meetings of CPC and ACC and from CPC itself. With the Joint Meetings taking place in the autumn, it would certainly be possible for recommendations on the themes to be selected to be submitted to the organizational session of the Council in the following year as was the case on this occasion. However, as long as the Joint Meetings continue to take place in the autumn and CPC continues to hold its main session in May, there would be no opportunity for the Joint Meetings to review the Secretary-General's reports on the themes, as was the case this year. 4/ Attention is also drawn to the emphasis that has been placed in the relevant Council resolutions on the personal participation of executive heads in the work of both the coordination segment of the Council and the Joint Meetings of the CPC/ACC. Under the current procedures, executive heads are thus expected to participate in discussions on the same thematic reports both at the Joint Meetings and thereafter at the coordination segment of the Council. It would thus seem necessary for the Council to evolve more practical arrangements consistent with the provisions of General Assembly resolution 45/264. The Council may, therefore, wish to review the present arrangements with respect to the contributions of the CPC and the Joint Meetings to the work of the coordination segment.

F. Working methods and organization of work

18. In accordance with the recommendations contained in Council resolutions 1988/77 and 1989/114, a number of steps have been taken which would help to improve the working methods and organization of work of the Council. In other cases, however, the recommendations have not been implemented. A review of the more relevant recommendations is outlined below.

1. Consolidated agenda items

19. At its organizational sessions of 1989 and 1990, the Council reviewed the recommendations concerning the consolidation of similar or closely related issues under a single agenda item in order to consider and take action on them in an integrated manner. As a result, the number of agenda items before the Council has been reduced. Although this process has resulted in a clustering of items and subitems rather than a true consolidation, it has produced an artificial clustering of a number of items under a broad agenda item, such as that entitled, "Development and international economic cooperation", and a greater number of sub-items. It is suggested that the Council pay particular attention to the need to pursue the issue of consolidating agenda items. The Council has also taken no action to biennialize any items additional to those which were already considered on a biennial basis in 1988.

2. Calendar of conferences

20. In accordance with the request of the Council, the Secretary-General has ensured that meetings of the subsidiary bodies of the Council would end at least eight weeks before the session of the Council at which their reports are to be considered. He has been unable to make the same arrangements for most of those bodies whose reports are considered both by the Council and the General Assembly. These bodies are the Governing Council of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Governing Council of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Council (WFC) and CPC. The Council also decided that it should continue to consider further the biennialization of the sessions of its subsidiary bodies. However, no action has been taken by the Council to biennialize the meetings schedule of any of its subsidiary bodies which, in 1988, had been accustomed to meeting annually. These bodies are the Commission on Transnational Corporations, the Commission on Human Rights, and the Commission on the Status of Women (to the year 2000). In addition, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs now meets, to all intent and purposes, on an annual basis; the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, established by the Council in its resolution 1992/1 of 6 February 1992, also meets annually.

G. Documentation

21. In both resolutions 1988/77 and 1989/114, the Council expressed concern about the content and timeliness of the documentation being submitted to it. In 1989 and 1990 the Council established an open-ended task force on documentation which examined a number of issues, and during the course of the same year the President of the Council and members of the Bureau held informal meetings with members of the Council to review the status of preparation of documentation. The recommendations of the task force (see E/1990/93) have not been applied consistently. Since 1991, however, less attention has been focused on issues relating to the quality and timeliness of documentation. In particular, the question of the preparation of issue-oriented consolidated

reports has not been pursued. Only the recommendation relating to reports before the Council being prefaced by an executive summary has been implemented with some consistency.

22. The Secretary-General considers that improvement in the documentation situation to be one of the most important challenges facing the Council as it continues to pursue the revitalization process. To put it simply, the number of documents requested by the Council is greater than the Secretariat can produce in a timely manner, while striving to ensure high quality. Council members are all too aware that, as a consequence of the late submission and production of reports, they do not have sufficient time to give those documents due study and attention. While it is certainly true that repeated requests by the Council for the Secretariat to act in full compliance with the six-week rule have not succeeded in assuring early availability of documents, this has not been for lack of effort or goodwill on the part of the Secretariat.

23. Documentation is generated from two sources: one is the standing mandates of the subsidiary bodies that report to the Council; the other derives from requests for documentation contained in resolutions and decisions adopted by the Council under various agenda items. For documentation to be reduced, the Council has two options. It can reduce the number of its subsidiary bodies or it can exercise restraint in its requests for documentation under particular agenda items. The Council can also exercise both options. In regard to the latter, a reduction in the number of agenda items before the Council either through further consolidation of items or a further biennialization should be considered. Without measures of this nature being taken, it is unlikely that the quality and timeliness of the documentation submitted to the Council can be improved.

H. Election of the Bureau and preparations for the organizational session

24. In Council resolution 1988/77, the Council decided that it would elect its President and Bureau early in the calendar year prior to the organizational session of the Council and that the President, with the cooperation of the other members of the Bureau, should arrange in advance of the organizational session, for consultations with members of the Council on the draft programme of work and provisional agenda prepared by the Secretary-General and on the allocation of agenda items and make proposals thereon for consideration by the Council; the duration of the organizational session of the Council could consequently be shortened.

25. These provisions have been fully implemented with effect from calendar year 1989. The President and the Bureau are now normally elected in the middle or the third week of January and immediately commence informal consultations on the draft programme of work and provisional agenda with members of the Council. These prior consultations have not, however, served, in real terms, to shorten the duration of the organizational session.

Although the organizational session usually ends on the same day scheduled for its conclusion with less use being made of the official number of meetings allocated to it, in effect, more rather than less time is being taken to deal with the issues before the organizational session through extensive informal consultations. Bearing in mind the increased importance which the organizational session has assumed and the fact that the Council will now hold only one substantive session a year, the Secretary-General is none the less of the view that the new arrangements are working well in practice and should be maintained.

I. Secretariat support

26. In its resolutions 1988/77 and 1989/114, the Council had called for the establishment of a separate and identifiable secretariat support structure for the Council which would undertake the substantive functions and technical servicing needed to implement various aspects of the aforementioned resolutions. As a result of the restructuring of the Secretariat which the Secretary-General has implemented, there has been established within the Department of Economic and Social Development a Division of Economic and Social Council Affairs and Inter-Agency Coordination. This Division will be responsible for servicing the high-level, coordination and other segments of the Council as well as its subsidiary bodies.

Notes

1/ See E/1989/95, para. 60 and E/1990/75, para. 28.

2/ See Official Records of the General Assembly, Forty-fourth Session, Supplement No. 16 (A/44/16).

3/ See E/1992/11/Add.2.

4/ The question of establishing a multi-year work programme for themes to be considered at the coordination segment is related to the considerations advanced in this section of the present report.